

## Why Does God Allow Suffering and Death?

Certainly one of the most pressing questions Christians must face has to do with how a loving God can allow all the suffering, pain and death in the world. Is he not powerful enough to stop it? Doesn't he care? Epicurus, the ancient Greek philosopher, once wrote, "If God wishes to prevent evil but cannot, then he is impotent; if he could, but will not, he is malevolent."

How can we believe in a loving God when a man lies on a bed suffering agony from terminal cancer? Where is a loving God when a young mother dies a premature death and leaves her husband with three young children to care for? How can a loving God allow an innocent child to die under the wheels of a speeding automobile being driven by a drunken teenager? Or how can we believe in a loving God when a flood or famine wipes out our community?

Why does God allow suffering and death? Where is God in times of tragedy? Such questions don't have simple answers. Nevertheless, from the Bible we can find at least three reasons as to why God does allow suffering and death.

The first reason God allows suffering and death is because of sin's effect. We learn of sin's effect on the earth in the third chapter of Genesis. God put together a perfect world that was free of sin, yet at the same time a world that allowed freedom of choice. And man chose sin! But consequences came with sin so that God's once perfect, beautiful, magnificent creation was severely marred. Never forget that our world is defective because of sin!

If you buy an automobile that has a cracked block, shorted wiring, a leaking gas tank and crumpled fenders, you can hardly expect it to perform like a brand new automobile. And so it is with God's creation. It is broken, crumpled, banged up and marred. As a result, you can't

expect it to function as if it were perfect, without the natural consequences of sin.

The Bible also teaches that we as individuals and families have become the recipients of sin's effect. The prophet Jeremiah wrote in Lamentations 5:7, "Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment." Tragic as it seems, the natural consequences of sin are passed from generation to generation.

Physically, venereal disease and malnutrition and communicable diseases can all be cited as natural consequences of sin that can be passed on from generation to generation. Psychologically, we hear reports frequently that the molding of a child's personality is pretty well set by the fifth birthday. What happens if during those years the parents' lives are characterized by an overt disobedience to God? Then those innocent children suffer the effects of what their parents have done. And spiritually, what parents do leaves an indelible impression upon the lives of children. God allows all of

this to occur as a necessary corollary to free choice!

But it's not as if the consequences of sin were limited to earth and the human race because God was effected by sin as well. God sent his Son

to suffer and die for sins that he did not commit! It is clearly taught in Hebrews 12:2 that Jesus suffered because of what we did. Through Jesus' death God paid the penalty for sin that far exceeded these natural effects of sin.

Recently I read a fascinating book that deals with leprosy. Leprosy is a disease that we know very little about in the United States. It deadens nerve endings to the point that victims cannot feel pain. Consequently, many lepers lose hands and arms and even life itself because they lack the "pain signal" to withdraw from danger. The natural effects of sin are like the "pain

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signals” of the human race, warning it of danger. They are a benefit, not a drawback! They constantly remind us of how terrible and ugly sin really is.

There is a second reason why God allows suffering and death and that is for God’s own glory. The ultimate goal of man, according to the Westminster Confession, is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. In I Chronicles 16:28 we find that it is the responsibility of all of mankind to glorify God. I Corinthians 6:20 tells us that it is responsibility of the Christian to “honor God with your body.”

To glorify God means to enhance his reputation. It may seem terribly egotistical for God to want us to enhance his reputation but it comes back to our understanding of who God is. God asks that we, as his creatures, glorify him or enhance his reputation as the Creator.

One of the most interesting books in the Bible is the book of Job. We don’t know who wrote it or when it was written or where it fits in the chronology of the Bible, but in it we find an amazing drama. Job suffered the loss of his livestock, his servants, his children and his health in order to vindicate God’s claim to Satan that Job was a righteous man. But Job never knew why!

In John 9:1-3 Jesus encountered a man who had been born blind. Jesus’ disciples asked him, “. . . who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered them, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” And then Jesus healed him. God allowed a man to be born blind so that when Jesus came his way Jesus could heal him and God could be honored and glorified in it!

And then there’s the sickness and even the death of Lazarus. Why was that? According to John 11:4 it was “for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”

What a great privilege it is to suffer and die to bring glory to God! But it takes a truly spiritual perspective. It requires a fanatical desire to live for God alone. It takes an allegiance to

God that says he is Number One. With thousands of useless lives and unnecessary deaths it’s a high calling to suffer and die to bring glory to God!

Early church martyrs died horrible deaths after lengthy torture, but their actions while facing death did more to win the Empire to Christ than any words spoken by the living. If we should ever be called upon to suffer and die from Christ we should count it a privilege.

You may think it strange, but a third reason why God allows suffering and death is because of our needs. First, it’s our need to empathize with others. The Apostle Paul wrote in II Corinthians 1:4-5, “. . . (God) comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”

Have you ever experienced that? I have. I’ve had experiences where I have suffered for no apparent reason. But then perhaps months or years later God sends someone across my path who is going through a similar situation and I am able to say to that person, “I’ve experienced that. Let me tell you what God did in my case.”

We have that need to empathize or minister to others, but we also have the need to empathize with Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 1:29, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” The early church considered suffering for Christ to be the highest and loftiest of privileges.

Then there’s the need for hope. The suffering and afflictions of this life help us to anticipate the life to come. Many of us in America have become mesmerized with the luxury we experience here to the point that we don’t care about heaven. We’re caught up in the “good life”. But the one exception to that is death. Romans 8:18 tells us that we can’t even compare the suffering of this life with the glory to come.

Another need that we have is for chastening. In Hebrews 12:5-11 we’re taught about the

chastening or discipline that God gives. This discipline serves to prove that God is our Father. In fact, it is one of the ways that we can have assurance of our salvation.

I don't know about you, but I don't discipline your children; I discipline mine. The way to identify what child belongs to what parents is on the basis of who does the disciplining. And so it is that we can tell that we belong to God when he disciplines us. God allows us to suffer so that he can discipline us and change us and make us the way we ought to be.

Hebrews 12:11 says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." God uses the tough experiences to shape us into what he wants us to be and to bring us peace.

To me, one of the most precious chapters of the Bible is the fifteen chapter of John. In this chapter Jesus and his disciples were walking through a garden where there were vines and branches. In verse 2 Jesus said, "(The Father) cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." Pruning may even require the divine removal of an unproductive Christian. Sometimes it has to go that far. Pruning is a difficult experience, but it results in fruitfulness.

Have you ever watched someone prune a tree? It certainly seems tough on the tree. It may seem that the gardener cuts off so much that it almost kills the tree. The purpose, of course, is so that it will be more fruitful. And even though it's difficult to go through, the gardener does it in the best interest of that plant.

And so it is with God. He prunes us; he cuts us back. Sometimes it's a severe and painful cutting, but it is important that we remember there is no time that the gardener is closer to the plant than at that point when it is being

pruned!

Another need that we face is the need for humility. Again, it's the Apostle Paul who wrote in II Corinthians 12:7, "To keep me from becoming conceited . . . there was given me a thorn in my flesh . . ." Paul was well educated, well traveled and highly respected. Under those circumstances it's not difficult to imagine that it would be easy to become egotistical. But God allowed there to be a restricting influence. Paul calls it a thorn in the flesh.

Scholars have argued for centuries about what it was. Some say it was poor eyesight. Some say it was recurring malaria. Whatever it was, God allowed a continuing suffering aspect to Paul's life to maintain humility that in turn would maintain usefulness. Maybe God allows us to suffer so that we'll remain productive!

There's also the need to be an example. II Corinthians 4 is a chapter that deals with all kinds of problems that were faced by the early Corinthian church. In summing it up, this chapter says that our goal should be that the life of Christ might be revealed in our body. Our aim in life should be that we live out Christ's life in the midst of hardship so others can see him in us.

Have you ever watched a potter at his wheel? It's a fascinating thing to do. Sometimes he will take a seeming masterpiece and smash it into an ugly clump. Then he puts it back on the wheel and starts over because he won't settle for the smallest imperfection. We, as Christians, are like clay in the Creator's hands. We dare not criticize his desire that we be perfect, even if it means breaking us to remold us into the image of his own Son!

How do we apply all of this to the real pains and experiences of life? We begin with God, with an understanding of how perfect and holy and just and merciful he really is. Then we explain every experience of life, no matter how

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difficult that may be, in the light of the Bible's picture of God. We must not try to make God fit our image of how he should handle a situation.

I'm reminded of a story of a man who one day was driving a rural school bus. The bus stalled on the railroad tracks and, to his horror, he realized that a train was rapidly approaching. There was nothing he could do to avoid being hit or to get the children off the bus to safety. The driver died and with him died numerous school children and his own children as well.

As if his widow didn't have enough grief having lost her husband and her children, some blamed her for the tragedy. A friend sent her a telegram that read, "Remember, God is too wise to make a mistake and too kind to ever do anything cruel!" What that friend had done was to bring her thinking back to begin with God and then to explain life's sufferings and death in terms of the God who is too wise to make a mistake and too kind ever to do anything cruel.

The Apostle Paul wrote in the book of Romans:

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

No, in all these things we are *more than conquerors* through him who loved us.

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